

Picathartes—another West African forest relict with probable Asian affinities

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Sibley (1973) has reviewed the history of classification of *Picathartes*, a distinctive passerine genus consisting of 2 well-differentiated species, *P. oreas* and *P. gymnocephalus*, confined to the primary forests of western Africa. On the basis of additional egg-white protein data he reaffirmed his own previous conclusions (Sibley 1970), as well as those of Amadon (1943) and Delacour & Amadon (1951), that *Picathartes* belongs in the large and ill-defined family Timaliidae and not with the Corvidae or Sturnidae as had sometimes been suggested previously. Accepting this, the problem remains of determining the nearest relative of *Picathartes* within the Timaliidae.

Although he made note of Serle's (1952) observation that *Picathartes* bears a resemblance to the southeast Asian and Indonesian species *Eupetes macrocerus*, Sibley (1973: 24) considered that this similarity was "almost certainly the result of convergence". Serle evidently had little confidence in his own insight and maintained that *Picathartes* was nevertheless probably related to the Corvidae. The egg-white protein data prompted Sibley (1973) to propose a particularly close relationship between *Picathartes* and the African timaliid *Turdoides*. It would seem that such a conclusion was influenced by zoogeographic considerations and the fact that the only genera of Timaliidae analyzed by Sibley were *Turdoides*, *Trichastoma* and *Pomatostomus*—a sample which must be deemed inadequate for a proper assessment of relationships within this complex and quite possibly unnatural group of birds. (One may note in addition, that Sibley's egg-white protein results have recently been questioned on purely methodological grounds—Brush 1979.)

I believe that Serle was probably more correct than he realized in proposing a relationship between *Picathartes* and *Eupetes*. Currently placed in the genus *Eupetes* are the New Guinean species sometimes recognized as constituting a separate genus, *Ptilorrhoa*; for the present comparisons, however, I shall consider only *Eupetes macrocerus*, which is larger and more closely resembles *Picathartes* than do the New Guinean birds. *Eupetes macrocerus* and *Picathartes* have in common a similar build; long, strong tarsi; a long, well-developed tail; lax, decomposed plumage; and a long, slender neck. As in *Picathartes*, part of the head pattern in *Eupetes macrocerus* consists of bare skin, although this is a more restricted patch which extends along the sides of the neck. The long, slender bill of *Eupetes macrocerus* is more closely approximated by that of *Picathartes oreas* than by *P. gymnocephala*, and the pattern of the short, black velutinous feathers of the lores and cheeks of *E. macrocerus* is similar to the pattern of the dark portions of bare skin on the head of *P. oreas*. Both *Eupetes macrocerus* and the 2 species of *Picathartes* are terrestrial birds of primary forest and are noted for their speed and agility on the forest floor. This contrasts markedly with *Turdoides*, which is an arboreal, shrub-dwelling bird of more arid upland savannas. Furthermore, there is absolutely no resemblance in external appearance between *Turdoides* and *Picathartes*. *Turdoides* lacks any bare areas on the head or neck, the bill shape is different,

the tarsi and tail are proportionately shorter, and there is no similarity between them in either plumage texture or pattern. The plumage pattern in both *Picathartes* and *Eupetes* consists of areas of uniform colouration without squamation or streaks as in most species of *Turdoides*.

The fact that the ranges of *Picathartes* and *Eupetes* are widely separated in west Africa and southeast Asia, respectively, in no way militates against a presumption of relationship between these genera. Elsewhere (Olson 1973), I have pointed out several diverse groups of birds and mammals that show similar patterns of distribution. Some of the more striking examples among birds are as follows (African forms listed first in each pair): *Tigriornis*—*Zonerodias*, *Afropavo*—*Pavo*, *Sarothrura*—*Rallicula*, *Phodilus prigoginei*—*P. badius*, *Verrauxia*—*Sasia*, *Pseudocalyptomena*—Asian broadbills, *Pseudochelidon eurystomina*—*P. sirintarae*. These discontinuous patterns probably have their origins in Quaternary environmental deterioration of formerly forested areas between Africa and southeast Asia. It probably has not been often enough emphasized that many of the endemic elements of the West African forest fauna are relicts of once more generally distributed Old World groups, related survivors of which often persist in Southeast Asia as well.

Although there seems to be no reason to contradict the placement of *Picathartes* in the Timaliidae, the suggestion that it is closely related to *Turdoides* is here considered unlikely. A closer relationship of *Picathartes* to *Eupetes* seems more reasonable on morphological grounds and is in accord with zoogeographic patterns observed in other avian taxa. This, of course, remains to be substantiated by detailed anatomical and behavioural studies, knowledge of *Eupetes* being particularly deficient because the genus has evidently excited less admiration and interest than has *Picathartes*.

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